The Present Direction of Music

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Music appears to be entering a period of slowed growth, in that no really new styles have emerged for at least a generation; contrary to the usual historical trend, however, it seems unlikely that any new styles will eventually emerge -- no next great "ism", in other words. Unlikely, because not only are musicians well overdue to create any new styles, but have instead consolidated their understanding of music, attaching themselves rather firmly to the ones already established -- Neo-Romantic, Modernist, etc. This basic trend is true in all the other arts as well. The usual, and convincing, objection to this argument, which is, "there's always been considerable stylistic change before, so why should it be any different now?" doesn't carry the same weight anymore, mainly because the pattern of new styles every generation or so has already been broken (as there are no new styles), but also because western culture as a whole may now be viewed in perspective alongside other cultures from around the world, which have already experienced something similar to what seems to be now occurring in our own. Rather than rush to announce the death of culture, however, it seems more productive to focus on what real, though small, evolutionary steps can be made, which in music means such things as making use of new technologies, incorporating exotic music, etc., always within the basic compositional frameworks already established. This sort of evolution is in fact highly desirable, as the main alternatives seem to be either an increasing level of virtuosity among musical styles, as succeeding generations of composers have their takes on them (and, as most concert-goers will agree, contemporary music tends to have plenty of virtuosity as it is, and can hardly stand much more), or a wasted attempt to create new styles (there being none to create).

The last, or one of the last, really new musical styles was Minimalism, which itself seems to have been something of a dead-end, considering that the main composers of that style are all now making music in a much more straightforward -- traditional-sounding -- tonal style. (In fact the succeeding generation of Minimalist composers began pushing the style back into the tonal fold right away -- John Adams' earlier pieces exemplify this point, with their more pronounced sense of harmonic direction, more involved orchestration, etc., than those of predecessors like Philip Glass.) The same is true of other new styles, as Spectralism: they fail to stand on their own, instead becoming absorbed into more general styles. All other new styles either have "neo" affixed to them (as “Neo-Romanticism”) or may as well have (as "New Complexity", which is obviously an extension of Modernism – if "Neo-Modernism" weren't a contradiction in terms, this is likely how that style would be named). Yet prior to the present time, as is well known, music evolved rapidly over the centuries, from the Baroque to the Classical to the Romantic, to all the myriad styles of the early twentieth century -- the pace of evolution having picked up steam sometime during the middle ages, and not really slowing down until, so it seems, the present day.

It's possible to see -- hear, rather -- how musical evolution has slowed within the last fifty years or so: compare, for example, the music of Gyorgy Ligeti with that of his countryman Bela Bartok, a generation before him, and then compare Ligeti's music with that of his student Unsuk Chin, and it's clear that on the whole, the difference in style is considerably more noticeable between Bartok and Ligeti than between Ligeti and Chin. The reason Chin's music doesn't sound as unique as Modernist music did in its day is not due to any lack of ability on her part (as she's obviously brilliant), but simply that western musical culture isn't growing as rapidly now as it was one hundred years ago, or even fifty years ago. This is also the reason why no concerts have ended in scandal, or even provoked arguments among the listeners, which characterized much of the 20th century, and to a lesser degree those preceding it. It's easy to draw a parallel in all the other arts as well: architecture, to take a readily-proved example, has produced no dramatically new buildings for a while, as anyone can tell after walking around any big city; in literature, there's no-one today with the innovations of James Joyce, painting has no-one like Pablo Picasso, and so on down the list.

What is the cause of this slowing down of cultural evolution (if it's granted that it is slowing down)? From a musical standpoint, the answer seems to be that composers really have "tried it all" -- that in fact the excesses of the 60's and 70's (such as those of John Cage, and even occasionally of more serious composers like Luciano Berio) were an overstepping of the artistic bounds, and now the idea is to consolidate what counts most from a musical standpoint, and otherwise leaving alone the more radical ideas of the recent past (some composers still do assign random notes to the players, but not often and never for an entire piece, as some of those earlier pieces were). Similarly in the other arts: painting, for example, like music had some peculiar experiments several decades ago (such as people rolling around in the paint, to take an absurd example), and while some still literally fling paint at the canvas, as it's proven an effective technique, none (or very few) fling it at the people around them at the same time. The explanation for this is the same as with music: the outer-most artistic bounds (one might say the bounds of reason as well) were discovered, and sometimes overstepped, and now artists are simply moving back within those bounds.

One likely objection to this argument is that for centuries people have been saying that there are no new discoveries to make, in the arts, sciences, or anything at all, yet a big change has always been right around the corner, and that must be what's going to happen now too (so the objection proceeds). Yet why must history -- artistic or otherwise -- always repeat itself? If history really works this way, producing strikingly new art regularly, then not only is a powerful new style overdue, but the original styles of the past few decades -- Minimalism, Spectralism, etc. -- should have been the harbingers of a great explosion of new music, just as the crescendo of "isms" of a hundred years ago reached a peak in the tremendous creativity of the generation of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, et al. Yet not only is there no strikingly new music on the radar, or even little-known but highly original composers, like Anton Webern, promising to open the floodgates on a new era (none that I've heard, at least), but young composers today all seem to have turned well within accepted stylistic constraints -- Modernistic, Neo-Classic, etc. Whereas when Pierre Boulez produced his first mature works and sounded very new, no young composer today is especially difficult to place in terms of stylistic origins: one sounds a bit like Boulez, one is reminiscent of Stravinsky, one has a jazz background, etc. And

though Boulez too had his stylistic precedents (such as Webern and Messiaen), the music itself sounded much more "new" than that of today, which points to the likelihood of a present movement not towards major innovation, but rather towards consolidation.

This scenario is not a fault, however, as many great composers, such as J.S. Bach, created more or less within traditional bounds; and even so there are still new discoveries to be made -- it's likely that electronics/computers will continue to prove fertile ground for new ideas, those being the most recent additions to music-making capabilities; and exotic music (including western music of the distant past) and instruments will likely continue to inspire composers in their music-making (though attempts at all-out cultural "fusion" -- crossing very different styles with one another -- tend to fail, as evinced by the fact that they leave few to no artistic descendants: artistically more mules than stallions). But those discoveries represent small steps, and as far as truly epoch-making ideas, such as Serialism, it seems western music has had its last big growth spurts.

One of the standard fears surrounding this scenario of slowed cultural growth seems to be that such a culture becomes afflicted with sclerosis, always holding up the past as a golden age, and refusing to accept anything that doesn't closely conform to those past models. No doubt this is a grim picture, but when has it actually been realized? Nazi Germany was infamous for its intolerance, as was Red Russia, but western democracies today, though not exactly the healthiest of societies, are certainly better off than those dictatorships, and music schools today are liberal in incorporating unusual music -- ancient music, world music, etc. -- into mainstream compositional programs. The fact is that young musicians have never had it better: a gifted student is free to develop her abilities in the directions they want to go -- with resources available to her that Baroque composers could only dream of -- and even a bad student composer is allowed to scribble away and have the results performed by quality student musicians. This state of affairs hardly seems a harbinger of a restrictive, unhealthy artistic culture. And in any case it's very hard to imagine that original artistic creation could cease: music-making, and artistic production in general, is a natural human activity, found in all times and places, and provided society everywhere doesn't collapse into totalitarianism (which is the death of original art) -- that is, so long as artists somewhere are free to express themselves and their times, that's certainly what they'll do, not out of duty so much, as from the pleasure of creation. Even if this weren't true, it's still useless trying to force artists to always seek entirely new forms of expression -- this is as bad as trying to force them to adhere closely to old models, as both methods are tyrannical and will stunt many an artist's potentials if adhered to for any length of time.

It appears that music, and the other arts, really have arrived at a unique point in cultural history -- one where the artistic learning curve, so to speak, has started to level off. This has already happened in other parts of the world: most world music, for example, reached a stage of stylistic maturity some time ago (as in many generations ago), and have been evolving only very slowly since. It's been claimed that these styles of music have stopped growing altogether -- some even declare them "dead" on this account. This is simply not true, however, as anyone can hear by listening to recordings of such music made nearly a century ago and comparing them with recordings made today. Indian music, for example, has had innovators over the last hundred years who may have been frowned upon by some but who are now generally revered -- musicians like Sundaram Balachandar and Ustad Amjad

Ali Khan, for example -- and while it's true that the difference they created is not comparable to that between the Classical and Romantic ages in the west, still their music has grown some, and again, Indian musical evolution began levelling off quite some time ago, whereas that of the west has only recently started to do so[1]. And in fact it's just such small steps that are likely to chart the progress of western art from now on, as opposed to the dramatic shifts audiences have become used to; an ironic and important consequence of this is that seeking to create totally new music, as the Modernists claimed to do -- or new painting, new sculpture, etc. -- is now an anachronistic pursuit, as there's no longer any to create.

One trade-off of the lack of revolutionary spirit in music today is that many composers now write with a polish unobtainable by their predecessors -- Unsuk Chin and her teacher, Gyorgy Ligeti, make for another apposite example in this regard; Brian Ferneyhough, to take another example, tends to sound like a late-model Iannis Xenakis, and the list goes on. The problem here, it seems, is not that evolution is slowing down, and no really new styles are emerging (though that does seem to have happened), but that composers are becoming too virtuosic, too wrapped up in their own worlds to communicate much to ordinary mortals, leaving their audiences with feelings of apathy (not having understood the works) and isolation (as it's hard to feel connected to something incomprehensible), rather than the more positive feelings usually associated with classical music (and no doubt this ability to communicate with an ordinary listener is the basis for the perennial appeal of Bach, Mozart, and all the other great classical composers).[2]

Likely this is a natural consequence of the consolidation of an artistic culture, the urge to dress up older ideas. In fact this trend to virtuosity has always been around: compare Vivaldi's concerti with those of Bach, or Haydn's symphonies with those of Beethoven, and it's clear music has been experiencing this pattern for some time -- the difference today is that there aren't any new styles to "reset" the trend to increasing complexity, as there have been in the past, as one age gave way to the next. And so, as one can trace the increasing difficulty of music from Bartok to Ligeti to Chin, it appears not only unreasonable to take the trend any further in the same direction, but potentially even dangerous: artists, like people generally, have been known to damage their minds by straining them too hard.

Just as a search for new styles now appears to be a fruitless pursuit -- there being evidently none to find -- similarly a continued push to greater virtuosity is unpromising, music being in many cases more difficult than is good for it already, if audience enthusiasm for new music is any indication. What then is the way forward? It appears that small steps, such as using new technologies, but within existing compositional frameworks, holds the most promise for real (if humble) originality and growth; this sort of slow progress is just what has already occurred in other musical cultures -- why should the west be placed on an elevated plane in this regard? All such innovations, however, must necessarily be incorporated within existing compositional frameworks, being too small to create their own; the results aren't as spectacular as audiences have come to expect from music, or indeed from the other arts as well -- the striking new styles appearing regularly from the very start -- but they are real, unlike those produced by attempting to adhere entirely to the past, that is, not only by following old models

slavishly, but also, these days, by pushing for entirely new styles, or for greater virtuosity on the ones already existing.

One important consequence of this trajectory will be the disappearance of the heroic, larger-than-life artists, like Joyce or Boulez, forging new worlds for themselves, far above ordinary souls, and the re-appearance of more down-to-earth, humble geniuses, like J.S. Bach, but on a permanent basis, for such people are constitutionally more able to accept what little progress there is to be made in any generation. Ravi Shankar's plain-speaking and lack of self-importance are characteristic of a culture that has been fully mature for some time, and similar characters should now begin to appear in greater numbers in the west, provided the absurdity of the present virulent ego-centricity is somehow generally accepted as such, and replaced with a less-harmful popular mythology. And who knows – if these observations are accurate, and once the smoke of the twentieth century finally clears entirely, perhaps something like a new common practice of music, and of art in general, will emerge, even encouraging musicians to no longer say, "my music", but, as musicians in India learned long ago to say, "our music".

Notes

[1]The fact that Indian music has only two basic styles (between northern and southern India), while the west has so many, is aside the point; within the context of this essay, it seems enough to say that both grew out of much simpler (religious) origins, and that western musical history with its old pattern of wide shifts of style, is, nevertheless, like Indian music with its more smooth historical evolution, no longer evincing considerable change.

[2]Though it's true that the same complaint about virtuosity (that it doesn't communicate well) has also been around from the start as well: Bach's music was declared too complex, Beethoven's noisy, etc., by listeners of the day; why those composers came to be cherished, while the great music of the 20th century (as well as of the Medieval and Renaissance periods) continues to have a peripheral presence in the concert halls is another question entirely; the relevant point for this essay is the fact that the pattern of greater virtuosity has already occurred within the existing musical styles, and that it's a mistake to try take this trend (to virtuosity) any further, since the music is already very hard to relate to.